Using Unclassified U.S. Government Reporting in America’s Global Battles of Influence

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The United States has potential weapons it can use in its competition with hostile states—and in building up its strategic partnerships—that it now badly undervalues. The U.S. government has a unique capability to generate official analyses and databases on threat countries, on cooperation with strategic partners, on key aspects of national security policy, and on a host of other areas where accurate and in-depth reporting, analysis, and data can become “weapons of influence” in shaping the views and analysis of foreign governments, non-governmental organizations, think tanks, news media, and other institutions.

The Emeritus Chair in Strategy has prepared a brief analysis of the current strengths and weaknesses of the ways the U.S. government is now organized to use its unclassified intelligence reporting, national security reporting, and official reporting to counter threats like those posed by Russia and China, and to strengthen its relations with its strategic partners and other countries.

The analysis reveals that there are major problems in the present coverage and quality of official reporting and that major changes need to be made if such reporting is to be used efficiently in artificial intelligence and “big data” comparisons and analysis. It shows that the U.S. government only makes sporadic use of most of such information in influence operations. The main focus of official U.S. public affairs reporting is on issuing daily or short-term statements about meetings, and on “spinning” daily events and issues to get favorable coverage and favorable political messaging. It focuses on having an ephemeral impact, rather than on providing the kind of reporting in depth and accurate data that can have a far more lasting impact.

No one can deny the need for topical U.S. government public relations and information efforts that deal with daily events and issues, but the United States needs to take far more advantage of its capability for substantive data collection and the analysis it already carries out at both classified and unclassified levels. It needs to provide the kind of databases and analyses in depth that can serve as key sources of information and help shape longer-term perceptions and national security policy, and it needs to aggressively communicate the information at the departmental, agency, command, and embassy levels.

It now faces a mix of hostile powers and threats that carry out information warfare at both a civil and military level and on a global basis. There is no region in the world where it does not confront China and/or Russia on this basis, as well as lesser regional threats and terrorist and extremist movements.

At the same time, the United States also needs to look beyond its present reports and databases to consider how it can generate more useful “big data” that will help shape both global use of the web and future U.S. and foreign use of artificial intelligence. The United States not only needs to improve its current “weapons of influence but to realize that its present reporting a databases will often need radical revisions and improvements in a world where the ability to use data retrieval and management to improve almost every aspect of policy formation and implementation,
cooperation with strategic partners and other nations, and counter hostile information warfare will change radically over the coming decade.

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Giving the Proper Priority to Shaping U.S. Official Reports and Data as “Weapons of Influence”

The power of official U.S. reports can have in battles of influence is illustrated by both the impact of several past reports and by the contents of a number of ongoing reports and databases. At the most direct level, these include reports on key threats to the United States and reports and data that can have a major impact on strategic partnerships and in countering hostile information warfare.

Official Reporting on Major Threats

When it comes to past reports, the United States used to issue several official annual analyses and databases and analyses that gained broad global attention and served as weapons of influence. Key examples of such past reports include the U.S. annual reports on Soviet Military Power and World Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers (WMEAT).

During the Cold War, these two reports served as key global references that media, policy analysis, and strategic partners used to deal with the main foreign threat to the United States and provided reliable data on the military spending and arms transfer activities of every country in the world that no other source could provide with equal accuracy and depth.

Examples of current official reports on the threat and military balance that have this kind of impact include the Department of Defense’s annual report on Chinese Military Power and the U.S. official estimates of national holdings of nuclear weapons provided in the Department of State reporting on arms control. These reports are examples of documents that draw on declassified intelligence reports to provide data and analysis that communicated the official U.S. view in detail and served as references for which there is no outside equivalent.1

It is striking, however, that Chinese Military Power is now the only regular annual report the United States now publishes on key threats. The U.S. has failed to provide the kind of similar annual reporting on other key threat countries and the patterns in new threats from terrorists and extremists. It has only published one issue of a report on the military forces of countries like Russia, Iran, and North Korea, countries where no outside official source or NGO can create the kind of reference that is needed to properly characterize their evolving threat.

All three reports on these threats are now hopelessly out of date. The only unclassified report the Defense Intelligence Agency has issued on Russian Military Power dates back to 2017. The only report on Iran—Iran Military Power—dates back to 2019, and the only report on North Korean Military Power dates back to 2021.2 In each case, issuing one edition with minimal publicity produced a document that was more a draft than a finished report, and that failed to create the anything like audience and trust created by annual reports like Chinese Military Power, and the end result is to issue reports that have no real value as weapons of influence.

At a broader level, anyone who works with foreign NGOs and national security research centers becomes aware of how few foreign analysts are aware of the written version of the annual threat global assessment by the U.S. Office of National Intelligence that is provided along with the
Directors testimony and provides a brief summary of official U.S. perceptions of the threats to U.S. and global security.\(^3\)

This report to Congress is now little more than the shell of a meaningful analysis of the trends in the threats to the United States and largely ignores the threats they pose to our strategic partners, other states, and the global economy and stability. It also is only one example of existing reporting that could easily be expanded to provide data on the security challenges that threaten other democratic and stable governments and in net assessments by both foreign governments and outside analysts. At present, however, it is little more than an outline, and only its identification of how the U.S. ranks major threats receives serious outside attention.

It also reflects the fact that the United States has done remarkably little to develop unclassified reports that use net assessments to show the need for U.S. military and economic action to deal with the rising threats created by such countries and the value of U.S. strategic partners and alliances. It segregates its analyses of most civil and military issues, and it has failed to update its analyses of key shifts in the nuclear balance to look beyond the near collapse of most arms control efforts to key shifts in the balance and the rise of China and North Korea.

**Turning Other Executive Branch Reports into “Weapons of Influence”**

These issues aside, there are many other current U.S. government reports and databases that could be exploited more effectively to serve as “weapons of influence.” One example is the annual Department of States’s *Country Reports on Human Rights*. These reports not only cover human rights but also provide unique analyses of the levels of repression within the internal security structures of many states. They are one of the few sources of reliable data on the abuses some governments commit against their own populations and the rise of legitimate political challenges versus the threat of terrorist and extremist groups.\(^4\)

Another example is the CIA *World Factbook*. It provides a summary of key data on every nation in the world and one that ties together the different aspects of governance, economics, trade, demographics, and ethnic and religious data in ways where there is no outside equivalent. In some cases, it also is a source of national ranking and trends.\(^5\)

The CIA *World Factbook* is already used by some foreign analysts and government, although they cannot reference a CIA document, and it could also be easily expanded to provide a computerized quantitative database on national rankings and trends—a capability that many analytic and media centers in developing countries lack.

At a very different level of analysis, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence has developed a quadrennial report on how the world is estimated to evolve over the coming two decades entitled *Global Trends*. It is not a threat analysis per se, but it has evolved substantially into a useful overview of how the United States sees the key trends shaping the future since the first edition was issued in 1997.

The latest edition was issued in 2021 and is entitled *Global Trends: A More Contested World*. It looks beyond “spin” and short-term politics and presents a broad declassified forecast of the key
trends that will shape the world over the next 20 years. While this document—and its wide range of supporting analyses—have so far gotten surprisingly little global attention, it is the kind of official analysis that shows how the United States sees the world and that provides a clear view of the key issues the United States is focused upon. Its mix of summaries, a main report, and supporting documents provide both good policy level summaries and analysis in depth.

At the same time, the U.S. government issues a wide range of more detailed reports on U.S. foreign aid, arms sales, security assistance, global demographic trends, trade policy and sanctions, energy data, narcotics, and other activities that the United States does little to publicize on a global level. Even many U.S. academics and think tanks seem to be unaware of many of these reports and databases, and there is no serious U.S. effort to catalog and publicize them to foreign governments or the growing number of foreign think tanks, experts, and analysts.

There are too many examples of such reports to cite in-depth, but examples of underexploited databases include the U.S. Census Bureau’s International Database on demographics and population growth—a database that complements and supplements UN efforts and warns how serious population growth is becoming in the developing world. It also is an example of the fact that a U.S. government database can be developed in a form that allows the user to make detailed country-by-country comparison and trend analyses in graphic and tabular form. As an increasing number of outside web reports show, the ability to automate comparative and parametric analysis eliminates barriers to time and work effort and presents a far more accurate picture of what the data mean. It is a key feature of the ability to use large databases and in supporting the effective use of artificial intelligence.

Other key examples include the reporting and databases provided by the Energy Information Administration (EIA). This EIA reporting includes annual estimates of U.S. energy imports and exports, key strategic and country issues affecting energy supplies, the risks created by strategic chokepoints, and the international energy outlook. If anything, EIA’s international coverage, and risk assessment efforts has been steadily cut back at a time when climate change, the global energy trade, and China and Russia’s energy policies and income have become steadily more critical.

In short, when one talks about “big data” in practical terms, the executive branch of the U.S. government already provides detailed databases and reports on subjects that could have a major cumulative impact in shaping foreign and domestic perceptions of the United States and its policies. They include subjects like trade, comparative research and development efforts, foreign aid, security assistance activities, U.S. power projection capabilities, and the actual levels of U.S. military personnel deployed to given countries. They also include detailed reports on U.S. arms sales to Congress that describe major requests to Congress for its approval of foreign arms sales by item and country.

Looking Beyond the Executive Branch: Making Effective Use of Reports to Congress, Written Testimony, and the Congressional Research Service

The executive branch is only part of the story. The U.S. government also develops a wide range of additional departmental, congressional staff, and congressional committee reports on U.S. foreign policy, arms sales, security assistance, global demographic trends, energy data, and other
activities that the U.S. does little to publicize on a global level. Even many U.S. academics and
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think tanks, experts, and analysts.

The annual report of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission has become a
good example of such reporting. While the report draws largely on open sources rather than official
reporting, it provides a book-length analysis of the key annual trends affecting the United States,
China, and other states, and a U.S. view of the challenges China presents to both the United States
and the world. It, too, deserves a far higher profile as a U.S. weapon of influence.11

It is, however, only one example of a wide range of written official testimony to Congress that
covers many areas of major interest to other countries, and spotlights various aspects of U.S.
progress in creating strategic partnerships at both a civil and military level. Today, most such
efforts get little serious attention outside of Congress, and written testimony disappears into the
Congressional Record almost instantly, although the distribution of reporting on China has
improved steadily in recent years.

The reporting by the Congressional Research Service (CRS) is a broad example of the kind of
Congressional reporting that could have far more value as a weapon of influence if it was better
exploited. The CRS generates a wide range of detailed reports on U.S. policy that are deliberately
neutral and balanced in character and that summarize U.S. policy issues and debates in neutral
terms.

The CRS does have a good central search site, and several NGOs like the Federation of American
Scientists do publicize some CRS reports in ways that have an international impact. 12 However,
the work of the CRS is not actively publicized by the U.S. government, although the CRS often
issues some of the best and most neutral summaries of U.S. political positions as well as the key
facts and trends in U.S. policy and actions affecting foreign states.
Tying U.S. Budget Requests to U.S. Strategy on A Global Level

There also are areas where the U.S. government needs to consider how to reform some of its most basic reporting and database activities to provide more effective structures and content – reforms that are critical to making “big data” and the use of artificial intelligence more effective, and better planning and management of federal programs and funds, as well as communicating on a global level and provide weapons of influence.

Transforming a Failed Approach to National Security Budgeting

A key example where the U.S. could use official reporting to create better weapons of influence is the range of U.S. defense budget justification and spending data provided by the Comptroller of the Office of the Secretary of Defense. These reports and databases could be far more useful in building and reinforcing U.S. strategic partnerships and shaping non-governmental and foreign perceptions and analyses of U.S. defense plans and military analyses, as well as really effective U.S. efforts in national security planning, programming, and budgeting.

The vast majority of the annual budget justification documents provided since the collapse of the Former Soviet Union (FSU) have ceased to provide serious data on U.S. strategy, particularly by plan, program, and budget. The documents do provide a massive amount of spending data, but most such data are little more than the individual military shopping lists of the four U.S. military services.

The U.S. budget request overviews and summaries in recent annual defense budget requests are embarrassingly lacking in content and depth compared to the posture statements provided in the 1960s and 1970s. They also do less to present a clear picture of strategy, key aspects of the balance, and force modernization by mission than the best current annual white papers of other countries. These budget documents not only lack strategic depth, but they also fail to tie U.S. defense budgets to strategy and plans to present major program categories that have strategic meaning and to explain spending and planned progress in jointness and by major command. If one looks back to Department of Defense reporting from the early 1960s to mid-1970s, current defense budget requests are sharply inferior to the strategic posture statements, program budget data, and summary net assessments issued by the Secretary of Defense and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs during the Cold War.

Their shortfalls are also compounded by the Executive Branch testimony to Congress and supporting written budget and posture statements that fail to provide adequate data on joint strategy and to address the importance of strategic partners. As a result, some recent budget documents and testimony have recently given the impression that the United States has become so focused on China that it no longer has a critical interest in areas like the Middle East.

As the annual defense white papers of partner countries like Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and several other strategic partners now demonstrate, public defense white papers not only explain national military capabilities and modernization efforts, but they also present summary net assessments to explain the threat. They also show how official reports can provide explanations of
the role and importance of strategic partners and stress the value of cooperative defense efforts to both the United States and key partners.

Balanced in-depth reporting on America’s global defense posture can also avoid the problems created by the current U.S. emphasis on the Pacific and Taiwan at a time the United States and its allies face a war in Ukraine. They can explain that the United States and its partners now face the beginning of a confrontation with Russia that is almost certain to last as long as any leader like Vladimir Putin in power. It also can make it clear that the United States focusing on key threats does not mean it is not giving suitable priority to key challenges in the Middle East, Korea, and from violent extremist movements, and is not cutting capabilities critical to its allies and partners in other areas.

**Addressing Civil-Military Strategy, Plans, Programs, and Budgets**

It is equally striking that there is no U.S. official report that acts as a reference to the total levels of U.S. civil and military/security assistance strategy, plans and programs, and aid by country and region. The U.S. National Strategy and National Security Strategy documents are little more than outlines of U.S. goals with no real details and only the broadest focus on specific regions, threats, partners, and countries.17

At a time when the United States clearly faces major civil-military challenges from China and Russia and must compete at a political, economic, and technological level with China and Russia and other regional threats and actors on a country-by-country basis throughout the world, the United States divides its strategy, PPBS, and other reports into a virtual morass of separate reporting streams and databases.

For example, there is no official report on total U.S. military and civil national security spending. U.S. strategy and budget reporting that covers all elements of military and paramilitary activity is compartmented into separate reports on the Department of Defense, Department of Energy, Department of Homeland Security, intelligence agencies, and Veterans Administration.

More broadly, the reports on the civil side of U.S. strategy, policy, plans, programs, and budgets generally ignore national security expenditures and are stove-piped by department and agency and then by administrative function. For all the failings of the Department of Defense’s annual strategy and budget documents, the State Department and USAID reporting on its activities and foreign aid is more than 200 pages long, but it reports aid by bureaucratic element of the State Department, rather than by region, country, and strategic objective.18

The main State Department budget justification document begins with a brief five-page statement by the Secretary that does have some elements of strategy but consists largely of bureaucratic goals. The summary fiscal tables that follow only address broad global functions by total spending request, and the budget request then spends some eight pages on an FY2022-2026 Joint Strategic Plan Framework without presenting anything approaching a strategic plan or communicating U.S. goals and spending in a form that approaches a planning, programming, and budgeting effort.
The document then proceeds to provide some 200 pages of bureaucratic line-item budget data that does little to explain the strategy and purpose behind the spending by region or country and tie U.S. civil strategy and spending to the military efforts of the Department of Defense and other paramilitary and counterterrorism efforts.

The department does issue a supporting document that provides total spending by region with some strategic justification, but it does little to explain U.S. civil efforts overseas and describe their purpose and impact and provides almost no data by country. Other Department of State reporting normally scatters regional and country spending into so many bits and pieces that they are little more than an incoherent mess.

**How Military Strategy and Programs Interact with Civil Strategy and Programs**

These limits to U.S. official reporting on strategy and programs, plans, and budgets are matched by other problems where the United States needs to sharply improve its reporting and databases. The United States needs to stop separating reporting on civil and security activities and explain the combined civil-military impact of U.S. strategy and national security spending. Official reporting needs to fully recognize that civil-military “jointness” is as important as the “jointness” of the U.S. military services and members of the U.S. intelligence community.

The United States confronts a China and a Russia that each combine their civil and military efforts in their respective challenges to the United States, as well as are increasing cooperation with each other. In recent years, this confrontation has reached the point where the United States is engaged in something close to economic warfare with both China and Russia.

The United States cannot continue to separate its own civil and military efforts when it faces a Russia that the war in Ukraine has pressured into far more efforts to integrate civil and military strategy and faces a China that has taken the lead in many areas of economic competition—areas which are critical to America’s current battles of influence on a global level. U.S. reporting and information warfare activities must address the fact that U.S. military efforts must be tied to U.S. economic policies, and that link civil and economic strategy to U.S. military strategy, as well as U.S. security assistance aid efforts, and other civil security programs.

**Reporting on Arms Control and Nuclear Modernization**

At a different level, the United States needs better unclassified reporting on the dangers involved in the near collapse of nuclear and other arms control efforts. It needs to clearly explain current developments and U.S. policies in detail, as well as the growing threat posed by the nuclear modernization efforts of Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran.

The United States needs to flag the threat posed by the potential deployment of active theater nuclear and dual-capable conventional and nuclear delivery systems. Once again, arms control is a critical aspect of both America’s civil and military battles of influence.

**Focusing on Other Strategic Challenges as Well as Taiwan and the Pacific**
Official U.S. reporting needs to do a far better job of dealing with the fact that the United States cannot focus on the threat from China but must focus on major Russian threats the Europe and a wide range of regional threats, crises, and enduring problems on a global level.

The challenge Russia presents to the U.S. and NATO is a key case in point. At present, there is no public reporting on the limits each country faces in modernizing and standardizing its forces and the tangible progress it is making in dealing with these problems. The closest NATO comes is a meaningless report on whether countries spend 2 percent of their GDP on defense—a goal that only seven of 31 countries meet and where most nations that do meet that goal now have force plans and spending levels that fail to deal with their most serious military problems unless they make major changes in their forces plans.

This lack of any meaningful set of public goals and progress in meeting them is compounded by a NATO goal of spending 20 percent of national defense budgets on procurement. This goal is even more meaningless than the 2 percent goal because it again says nothing about the value of such spending in military terms and ignores the fact that member countries have very different national definitions of procurement.20

One possible answer would be to issue an annual unclassified report on NATO that focuses on nation-by-nation progress in creating an effective level of extended deterrence by explaining how important tangible force improvements are now. Such a report could do what NATO cannot do since an international organization must consider the political sensitivity of each member country. NATO countries need to focus on tangible force improvement goals and ones that clearly show the value of standardization and common approaches to modernization and given aspects of extended deterrence—particularly at a time when so many changes are occurring in tactics, technology, and areas like integrated operations and new battle management and common and control systems. The United States is the only country that can provide an unclassified overview of such efforts, which can be encouraged rather than being critical, and help develop a public debate over NATO force improvements that really matter.

At the same time, the United States needs to pay more attention to the instability and crisis in Latin America, Africa, the rest of Asia, and the Pacific. One of the few areas where almost all sources agree is that extremism, terrorism, and political instability pose global challenges. The same is true of population growth and migration, water issues, climate change, and failures in development, as well as the uncertainties shaping the current global economic system. The United States cannot focus on one threat at a time, or one major power or contingency.
Organizing to Make U.S. Official Reporting More Effective

Looking toward the future, there are a number of steps the United States could take to make its official reporting efforts more accessible to both U.S. and foreign users and allow them to make more effective use of their content. As noted earlier, such reforms will be vital in any case.

Creating a Central Reference Center, Catalog, or “Library”

One key step forward would be to create computerized catalogs and download capabilities for all such reports and spotlight them by department, agency, major U.S. command, and U.S. embassy website.

Important as dealing with day-to-day issues may be in public affairs terms, creating a central point of reference for all relevant official reports and databases that foreign governments and outside experts could use to quickly find official U.S. reporting on key issues and data could play a major in shaping both foreign and U.S. analyses and viewpoints over time. It could serve as a potential counter to the ephemeral nature of most of the ephemeral analyses and half-truths on the web and the growing extent to which the web emphasizes controversy, political spin, partisan views, and opinion over facts.

The effort involved in creating such a resource to highlight such “weapons of influence” would also be simplified if a standard format for describing reports and databases could be developed for every department, agency, and key congressional staff. This would allow them to update their portion of a central catalog and maintain a detailed departmental or agency library that served as a historical record and reference central for the department of agency.

Once again, the same would be true of evolving a mix of user-friendly ways to develop tables, graphs, and maps out of the data provided. Some databases already have a few features of this kind, although most were clearly developed by internal experts and IT staff who have little experience in using the data parametrically and in analyses that are not part of their immediate operations.

The lack of clear sources and uncertain information, poor ergonomics and descriptions of how to instruct the database, and the rigidities in making a wide range of even internal comparisons of trends compound the tendency to keep generating the same data in the same way despite changing user needs. Far too many reports and analyses reflect their evolution and history rather than focusing on current and future needs.

Managing “big data” requires more than web searches and AI routines that can find the data now on the web. It requires properly structured input data that is reliable, inclusive, and do not include a vast number of extraneous listings. It also requires the ability to assemble data from multiple databases quickly and in new and innovative ways.

Giving Embassies and Major Commands the Proper Proactive Role
U.S. embassies and major commands can also become far more effective tools in communicating such “weapons of influence” and altering other governments, academics, research centers, analysts, and media to the existence and value of U.S. government reports and data.

The United States would benefit from taking a focused approach to circulating U.S. official reports and data that made the web pages of U.S. embassies and the U.S. major commands reference points for finding key data on U.S. efforts to build strategic partnerships, trade and aid data, and military and civil regional security issues.

Today, the U.S. government is simply too large and too complex for many foreign governments, researchers, analysts, and media to search its reporting and databases, and the U.S. efforts to communicate at a local and regional level have never fully integrated the efforts of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) with those of the Department of State, and from abolishing the United States Information Agency in 1999.

The websites of most U.S. embassies and commands are not currently shaped to act as unclassified reference centers for U.S. official data that could have a major impact on a given country, region, or command function. Creating individual embassy and command websites that flagged key U.S. reports and statements that provide key reference data would not be a major effort, and it would be easy to tailor to meet local and regional interests in ways that would not commit an embassy or command to additional work efforts or taking controversial positions. It would also help to counter disinformation efforts with official U.S. data and information and stress strategic partnerships as well as key interests in aid, human rights, trade, and regional cooperation.

**Making U.S. Embassy Websites More Effective Weapons of Influence**

Each embassy could tailor its library to local needs and interests and focus on key U.S. policy initiatives in ways that would give foreign researchers access to official U.S. reports and data—cataloging official Department of State and other reports without committing the embassy to a given position. U.S. delegations to international organizations could take the same approach. This could not replace the need for ongoing information and public affairs efforts on a topical level, but it would help to give them continuity, credibility, and depth. It also would clearly distinguish what is really an official U.S. view from disinformation and views that are not official.

Such an effort would allow the embassy to tie together all the key information and reporting on a country, including U.S. foreign civil and military aid, and key common activities and efforts. It could often allow the presentation of U.S. efforts to create strategic partnerships and encourage development and reform without having the embassy take a proactive position in controversial cases.

**Making Major Command Websites Weapons of Influence**

The case for making U.S. major command websites into weapons of influence is equally strong. The United States has 11 combatant commands that cover the entire world as well as specialized functions that are of wide global interest. They include:
Each command already must prepare annual testimony that few foreign readers—including many who focus on national security issues—are fully aware of. This includes annual testimony by major U.S. military commanders that usually explain that the United States is committed to competing with such threats on a global level and define the level of ongoing force changes in depth—material that could have a major impact on foreign studies and reporting if it was given suitable publicity.

As is the case with embassies, creating command web sites that contained the full range of serious official U.S. reports and key databases would allow each command to fully publicize the unclassified aspects of strategic partnerships and present reports and studies that supported both U.S. security policy and the command’s efforts without committing it to taking a formal command position. Several commands, like the U.S. Central Command, Cyber Command, European Command, and Southern Command, have already taken major steps in this direction, although many still focus their web pages on topical events, public relations glitz, or internal issues.

Expanding such efforts would allow the command to fully explain its efforts to create strategic partnerships, explain joint exercises and training, stress U.S. power projection capabilities as well as foreign deployed forces, provide background on common threats, and show the United States was providing civil aid and support as well as military support. It could directly counter misinformation and deal with concerns like those of the Gulf states that limited U.S. cuts in foreign presence are driving factors despite the improvements taking place in U.S. power projection capabilities and force modernization.

Each command could work with both the Department of Defense and elements of the Defense Intelligence Agency, as well as State and local embassies, and could also help create the kind of focused analysis that could again counter disinformation and present declassified views in depth at a level local users could access.

**Compensating for the Limits to NGO and International Reporting**

Finally, the United States needs to make a more organized effort to deal with the limits of NGOs and other outside analyses and databases. There are many unofficial NGO and academic reports that try to provide data and analyses in areas that are critical to explaining U.S. policies and actions, explaining the role of strategic partners, and identifying key policy challenges. Many do act as
weapons of influence in their own right, but such reports are limited by their lack of access to classified data and resources.

Good as the work of NGOs like the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS) and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), they cannot bring the same depth of information or present an authoritative U.S. view.

Reporting by international bodies like the UN and World Bank has its own problems. Much of their reporting is useful, but it relies on country inputs, many of which reflect national policy goals rather than accurate data. For example, UN data do not provide an accurate picture of the real levels of military spending by nations like Russia and China, or of the actual cost and destination of global arms transfers—data the U.S. government issued for decades until its annual updates to the WMEAT database were cancelled last year.23

Efforts to ensure that international reports and data have valid inputs and are standardized to the point of being truly comparable have failed in many areas, particularly in the case of reporting by authoritarian and fragile/failed governments. The gaps in country reporting at least have a kind of honesty. Reporting politicized data and data that lack adequate collection efforts do not.
12 Search CRS reports at https://crsreports.congress.gov/.
14 For an all too characteristic example, see The Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller) of defense budget request data for FY2024 at https://comptroller.defense.gov/Budget-Materials/.
16 For a detailed analysis of just how shallow recent U.S. defense budget justifications have become, and how little of the Cold War planning, programming, and budgeting process remains, see Anthony H. Cordesman, The Biden Administration: Strategy and Reshaping the National Security Budget (February 2021). Commission on PPBE Reform, Commission on Planning, Programming, Budgeting, and Execution Reform: Interim Report August 2023 (Commission on PPBE Reform, August 2023), https://ppbereform.senate.gov/interimreport/ makes some useful suggestions for correcting these problems, but does not come close to addressing the need to create joint strategy driven assessments, force and modernization goals, and spending by major command; the need tie U.S. efforts to those of strategic partners, and the use of four military service shopping lists as a substitute for functional groupings of total spending that present joint programs that show the total use effort in strategy. It also fails to properly address the lack of meaningful estimates of the cost and structure of future year defense plans (FYDPs).


21 For a quick overview of each command's role, see https://www.defense.gov/About/combatant-commands/.
